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Tao How? Asian Religions and the Problem of Environmental Degradation

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Twenty-five years ago, Huston Smith wrote an article called *Tao Now*¹ to enlist the help of traditional Chinese attitudes toward Nature in expanding the West's environmental awareness. If my interrogative betrays a greater diffidence than his imperative, it is only because China, the land of the Tao, lacks an enviable environmental record. Sadly, it seems that the existence of noble cultural ideals regarding the environment, in India as well as China, have not been a sufficient guarantee of good stewardship.

ENVIRONMENTAL IDEALS IN INDIA AND CHINA

The archaic peoples who gave rise to the early civilizations of Greece, Sumer, and Mesopotamia, of Egypt, and of India and China, shared a similar sense of the cosmos. The names of the local gods were different of course, as were the details of the rituals surrounding them, but the central intuition was the same: The cosmos was a great, teeming kettle of sacred energies. Enveloped by what historian Eric Voegelin termed the "cosmological myth," these ancient peoples saw nature and cosmos, above and below, as a single sacred continuum. The world's creatures and its natural processes—the rain, the tides, the rotation of the starry vault—were understood as the multiform expression of divine life.

The Hebrews were among the first to introduce a significant variation to this ancient outlook. They, and the Christians and Muslims who branched from the same Abrahamic tree, framed the conception of a God who transcends the world he created. Some have claimed that this theological shift ultimately led to a special talent for technological destruction of the ecosphere, though we shall question this claim. In any case, the pantheism rejected by the Hebrews and their religious descendants lived on in lands to the East, shaping the religious and philosophical traditions that were to sprout on Indian and Chinese soil. This much can be said of India and China in the same breath. Let us now take each in turn.

India

We know little about the people who inhabited India prior to the arrival of the Aryans, but educated guesses based on the archaeological remains of the Indus Valley civilization suggest an agricultural people given to the worship of fertility and to rites honoring the inexhaustible fecundity of the Great Mother. From 2500 B.C. onward, the Aryan conquerors sculpted a great body of sacred literature called *Vedas*, which was to become the cornerstone of traditions we collectively call Hindu. The Vedic literature repeatedly expresses a vivid appreciation of and deep reverence for Nature. Many of the gods of the Vedic pantheon are linked to natural forces, and the fire sacrifice, that all-important Vedic ritual, is suffused with the sense that man is but a strand in the web of living energies comprising the universe, and that if he wishes to be served by Nature he must also serve it in turn. *Rta* was the word by which the Vedic seers pointed to the underlying order and purposefulness of natural phenomena. Harmony with *rta* was central to the Vedic ethic.

When most educated Westerners think of Hinduism, however, they think not of Vedic religion but of Vedanta, the philosophical articulation of ideas found mainly in the latest layers of *Vedas* called the *Upanishads* and the much later *Bhagavad-Gita*. Scholars have been unable to explain why the sages who composed the *Upanishads* had lost some of the uncritical exuberance for a richly lived earthly life that characterized earlier eras. Surfacing for the first time in the *Upanishads* was the notion that the world was *samsara*, an endless and ultimately tiresome round of birth and death and rebirth. The new spiritual ideal was to liberate oneself from this fruitless circling. India thus turned its gaze inward and became the

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world's pre-eminent psychologist, and this introspective bent explains, perhaps, why India's environmental ethic remains implicit only.

In any case, the Upanishads taught that the only completely satisfying end to life was union with the ultimate Ground of Reality, called Brahman, and that the manifest world we see about us is nothing but Brahman's *maya* or appearance. To be ignorant of this is to remain hungry for the things of this world and thus to keep circling. It has been suggested that the doctrine of *maya*, often translated as "illusion," marked a new chapter in India's attitude toward Nature, one that signaled its desacralization and consequent degradation. I do not see it that way. *Maya* has always had a double meaning in which the negative notion of "illusion" has been balanced by the positive one of "creative manifestation." The world, Hindus would admit, veils the face of God, but they would insist that the veil itself can help us peer more intently toward that Face. Nature, in other words, both conceals and reveals the Holy, the pivotal factor being the quality of mind one deploys. *Maya* is, at worst, an environmentally neutral doctrine.

The balance of India's implicit environmental ethic will always remain positive, however, if only for the presence of the doctrine of *ahimsa*—"nonviolence" or "non-harming." Originally a Jain concept, *ahimsa* resonates so deeply with the central Indian intuition of life's sacred matrix that it has become the common property of all Indian religions, including Buddhism. The *ahimsa* principle states: "Harm no living thing. All creatures great and small enjoy the life that is theirs and undergo some degree of suffering when wounded or annihilated. Therefore, refrain from hurting. As the web of life in which we live is delicate and interdependent, harming living things can only result in sorrowful repercussions. When you act, think not only of human beings but of *all* beings." Though the notion of reincarnation is employed primarily to underscore belief in a certain kind of deathlessness, it may also be

understood as a profound reminder that all life is linked.

The doctrine of *ahimsa* also lies behind the widespread practice of vegetarianism in India, and among Jains it is so deeply imperative that a dying person is counselled to voluntarily starve so as not to take any more plant life in a vain attempt to prolong his or her own life.

China

The style of the language used to describe Buddhism, a religion that originated in India and then spread to China, demonstrates the vast difference between these two cultures. Sanskrit is polysyllabic, alphabetic, and inflected, while Chinese is monosyllabic, pictographic, and noninflected. In literary style, Indians tend to be long-winded and didactic, while the Chinese prefer the terse and the enigmatic. The Indians enjoy a hyperbolic imagination and otherworldly flights of fancy to convey their religious insight. The Chinese, by contrast, seem refreshingly flatfooted. Their metaphors are homespun and natural. They are an earthy folk.

Thus it is not surprising that while the Indian attitude toward Nature remains implicit and backstage, the Chinese attitude is explicit and stage center. I cannot improve on Vaclav Smil's eloquent characterization:

A reverence for nature runs unmistakably through the long span of Chinese history. The poet . . . found the mountains his most faithful companion; . . . Buddhist monks sought their *dhyana* "midst fir and beech"; craftsmen located their buildings to "harmonize with the local currents of the cosmic breath"; painters were put through the rigors of mastering smooth, natural tapering bamboo leaves and plum branches . . . Attitudes, poetry, paintings, habits, common sayings, and regulations abound with images of nature and a view of man as a part of a greater order of things. Old trees are prized for their antiquity and dignity . . . flowers are loved and admired . . . The titles of old paintings envelop the mind in the magnificence of nature and induce reverence: Light Snow on the Mountain Pass; Brocaded Sea of Peach-Blossom Waves; Summer Retreat in the Eastern Grove; Ode on the Red Cliff; Listening to the Sounds of Spring Under Bamboo; Peaks Emerging from Spring Clouds.²

The mysterious and sacred source of such natural beauty and its pervasive principle of Order is called Tao. Attunement to it is the key to a balanced and happy life. The *Tao Te Ching* counsels:

Those who flow as Tao flows
Know they need no other force.
They feel no wear, they feel no tear
They need no mending, no repair.³

Attunement depends on the cultivation of attitudes of nonaggression and letting be (*wu-wei*). The *Tao Te Ching* encourages these attitudes through metaphors drawn from Nature, teaching meanwhile a profound respect for its integrity:

A man, born gentle and weak,
At death is hard and stiff.
Green plants tender and filled with sap,
At their death are withered and dry.
The stiff and unbending are disciples of death.
The gentle and yielding, disciples of life . . .
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering . . .
Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.
The universe is sacred.
You cannot improve it.
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.
If you try to hold it you will lose it . . .⁴
Man, at his best, like water,
Serves as he goes along:
Like water he seeks
The common level of life,
[He] loves living close to the earth,
Living clear down in his heart.⁵

In another influential Taoist book written some 1200 years later, one finds the injunction that "even insects and crawling things, herbs and trees, may not be injured."⁶

The practice of *feng-shui* also attests to Chinese environmental sensitivity. Literally meaning "wind-water," *feng-shui* has been defined as the "art of situating residences and last resting places so as to harmonize with the local currents of the cosmic breath."⁷ To this day it is practiced in Chinese communities the world over. Believing that wind, water, and land are alive, that they are forces we must live with and not simply live on, Chinese employ the services of a geomancer who, taking proper note of the forms of surrounding hills, the directions of water courses, the trend of the local winds and the heights and forms of surrounding buildings, will advise on where to build new homes or cemeteries so that those living may obtain health, wealth, and happiness, and those deceased may obtain peace.

One cannot leave the subject of China without saying a word about Confucius, the man whose thought has dominated Chinese history. He too taught a way of harmony

among the human, divine, and natural realms, though unlike the Taoists who preferred the meadow and the forest hermitage, Confucius' venues were the city and the drawing room. Dismayed over social unrest in his time, Confucius taught his students to imitate the virtues of the ancestors in China's putatively golden past. To this end he urged comprehensive education, adherence to time-honored norms, meticulous study of the classics and careful cultivation of character and manners.

When we meet the urbane Confucius in Taoist literature, he comes off second best, stiff and stodgy, though by Taoist standards, who would not? Though it is true that for Confucius, Nature might not have been quite the leitmotif it was for the Taoists, charging him with environmental callousness would be a travesty. Witness this passage from the *Analecsts*:

Confucius said: "Now suppose some prince were to recognize your merits, what would be your wishes? Tseng Hsi paused in his playing of the zither. Putting it aside he rose and replied: "I would like to take along five or six grownups and six or seven youths to bathe in the River Yi, and after the bath go and enjoy the breeze in the woods among the altars of Wu-Yi, and then return home, loitering and singing on our way." Confucius heaved a deep sigh and said: "You are a man after my own heart."⁸

ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES IN INDIA AND CHINA

We have seen that benevolent attitudes toward Nature and nonhuman life are etched deeply into the Indian and Chinese psyches. Despite this, their environmental records are deplorable. Again, let us take each land in turn.

India

Deforestation ranks high on the list of Indian missteps. Insatiable in its need for daily fuel, the burgeoning population of India has plundered its forest resources. Predictably, soil erosion and disruption of the balance in the local climate—more floods, more droughts—have followed.⁹ In the lower Himalayas, poor forest management methods, overgrazing, badly built roads, and benighted methods of farming and mining have compounded the negative effects of deforestation and led not only to soil erosion but to the disappearance of flora and fauna. Says one recent study: "The mountain range in the lower Himalayan region is acquiring the characteristics of deserts."¹⁰

Air pollution due primarily to coal burning is confined to industrial pockets but is serious nonetheless. Water pollution is a disgrace. Eighty percent of India's 700,000,000 people live in villages. Only 4% of them—that is, 28,000,000 out of 560,000,000—have safe drinking water.¹¹ “The major source of pollution,” says another study, “is domestic in origin, often fecal matter. The rest (about 10%) is industrial.”¹²

Nothing illustrates more vividly the paradoxical nature of India's relationship to the environment than the condition of the Ganges. Every year, at Benares alone, the ashes of 35,000 cremated human corpses are swept into the holy river. The ashes themselves are probably of little consequence and may even help to fertilize cropland downstream. But the demand for deliverance into the Ganges is so great that the log-burning crematoria on the river's banks cannot keep up. It is estimated that “at least 10,000 half-burned bodies are tossed into the river every year either at Varanasi or at towns upstream. Whole leprous corpses are often thrown into the river by ignorant townsmen who fear that burning would spread the leprosy bacilli in the air through the smoke.”¹³

Benares alone dumps 20,000,000 gallons of raw sewage into the river every day. One huge sewer pipe empties into the river only 100 yards *upstream* from the city's main drinking water intake pipe. The pollution is repeated in hundreds of cities and towns along the river, where authorities have not even considered the idea of sewage treatment plants. Industrial cities like Kanpur spew uncounted tons of chemical waste into the river, lacing it with poisonous mercury, magnesium, and chromium.¹⁴ One hears a Benares taxi driver say, “The Ganges is God,” and one hopes that the trend might be reversed. But one's hope dies as he completes his sentence: “God can't be polluted.”¹⁵

China

China's environmental record need not detain us long. Only three years ago a professor of geography named Vaclav Smil published a systematic, book-length study. Its subtitle is “Environmental Degradation in China,” but it is the book's title that tells all. Smil calls it *The Bad Earth*. China's record, reports Smil, “is a mixture of some excellent intentions and notable achievements with much casual neglect, astonishing irresponsibility and outright destruction!”¹⁶ Smil finds the overall situation “genuinely disquieting.”¹⁷ Why?

The glaring discrepancy between professed cultural ideals and actual practices raises troubling questions about the effectiveness of the former. One might wish to assuage one's misgivings by proposing that the discrepancy is merely a matter of recent history, as the Promethean spirit unleashed by modern technology overpowered the better judgment of traditional, religious man. But Rene Dubos^{18,19} and Yi-Fu Tuan^{6,20} have provided reasons for rejecting this explanation as oversimplified. For example, China, they point out, suffered from deforestation, overgrazing, and the related ills of desertification and erosion long before the advent of the Industrial Age and modern technology. It was far ahead of Europe in scientific and technological development until the 17th century, and used this technology on a massive and often destructive scale. The Chinese denuded their forests to create farmland, to produce industrial charcoal and domestic fuel and paper, to provide timber for the construction and reconstruction of cities (for it was not uncommon that entire cities were burnt to the ground during periods of internecine warfare), to deprive both wild beasts and bandits of hiding places, and to produce from pine soot the ink needed to keep armies of bureaucrats scribbling away. Tuan has also found evidence that Chinese farmers sometimes burned down forests to encourage the growth of small-sized sprouts in the burnt-over area in order to save themselves the labor of splitting wood!²¹

Even Buddhist monks share the blame. Dubos notes that they used enormous amounts of timber for the construction and constant reconstruction of their halls and temples, and that despite their supposed vegetarianism, kept livestock which overgrazed the surrounding lands. Tuan reports that cremation of the dead, which the Buddhists introduced to China, had a serious effect on the timber resources in the southeastern coastal provinces between the 10th and 14th centuries.

Dubos wryly suggests that the famed Chinese attitude toward Nature arose as a response to environmental damage done in antiquity, and that we owe our romantic notions of Chinese reverence for Nature to the writings of retired bureaucrats who lived on estates where Nature was systematically submitted to the pruning shear.

Nor would the story be much different in traditional India or in any other pretechnological society whose intellectuals espoused a

What good will religion do if we begin to choke on the air we breathe?

pantheistic reverence for Nature while they and their servants took from Nature what they wished. Standing on a hill of historical scholarship, Dubos asserts that

All over the globe and at all times in the past, men have pillaged nature and disturbed the ecological equilibrium, usually out of ignorance, but also because they have always been more concerned with immediate advantages than with long-range goals. Moreover, they could not foresee that they were preparing for ecological disasters, nor did they have a real choice of alternatives.²²

If Dubos is right about this, then various religious ideas about Nature have until now neither caused nor prevented environmental degradation; rather, these ideas have existed in splendid isolation from the actual practices of our ancestors, exerting little counterpoise to the pull of immediate needs. If we combine their ignorance of ecology, their lack of alternatives, and their perception of the seeming inexhaustibility of Nature, we get a situation where reverence for nature on the one hand, and environmental damage on the other, probably co-existed without generating moral conflict.

It is along these lines, by the way, that Dubos and others²³ have refuted the thesis of Lynn White who, in an influential article²⁴ argued that both the ideas of progress and of nature's mere instrumentality, ideas which have teamed up to produce modern technology and wreak havoc on the environment were outgrowths of Judaeo-Christian theology. Dubos would have us see that other sorts of theologies and metaphysics did not prevent pre-Christian and non-Christian peoples from devastating their environment, nor have the more naturalistic worldviews in Asia prevented the widespread and rapid acceptance of technology there. Moreover, Dubos has reminded us, Judaeo-Christian peoples have been the first to manifest a large-scale concern for land management and an ethic of nature.

Be that as it may, the co-existence of admirable religious ideals and destructive envi-

ronmental practices, which was possible for our forefathers, is no longer possible for us. What good will religion do if we begin to choke on the air we breathe? Two major pressures unknown to our ancestors have exacerbated our problem to terrifying proportions. They are, of course, population growth, which creates more immediate needs to satisfy and still more pressure to neglect long-term environmental considerations, and the invention of tools that extend human power to staggering dimensions.

If religious ideals concerning Nature, in Asia and the West, have now been shocked into a new wakefulness by environmental crises, they have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness in combatting it. Thus far they have been no match for the awful pressures of population and eco-destructive technologies. Asia's religious values certainly cannot be said to have caused the problem of environmental exploitation, but they have not shown themselves to be the solution either. We are left with a question. Can religious ideals, in this case, the Asian traditions, play a role in arresting environmental degradation in the future and, if so, how?

AVENUES OF HOPE

Ironically, it is largely because our lifeboat has started to sink that we have begun to think of ourselves as aboard a single, delicately constructed craft. Our awareness of devastation has led to the first long-range policies for environmental protection in human history. Increasing awareness of the interdependence of life systems has boosted us into the global perspective from which we now view our problems. The explosion of population and the development of high speed communication and transportation, which have been cited as causes of environmental damage and the decreasing quality of life, have also been directly responsible for engendering global viewpoints. The humanization of the planet is the price we have paid for the planetization of the human.²⁵

Though many decry the erosion of old cultural forms and their replacement by a technological monoculture, it might be wildly hoped that this shift will, over time, also erode religious nationalism. Patrick Burke has said that the birth of a new religion awaits the birth of a new culture.²⁶ We do not think that the world needs a new religion, but perhaps a new global culture can engender a new religious sensibility, a global spirituality in which the world's diverse relig-

ious traditions are unified and outspoken in their vision of the Earth's sacred nature.

In such a milieu, we can also hope that Jews and Christians will be increasingly comfortable, recalling a Hindu lesson about the sacredness of life or the duty of *ahimsa*, or weaving a Taoist maxim into their discourse, or reverencing the Earth as the Divine Mother, as the Native Americans do, or as Mother Goddess Gaia, as the ancient Greeks did. Moreover, ministers, theologians, and philosophers exposed to other traditions might begin to rediscover environmental gems in their own back yard. None of this is visionary, of course; it is already happening. But it needs to happen much more.

If we were to try to put a finger on the single most powerful contribution that the Asian philosophical and religious traditions could make to a global environmental ethic, it would be their penchant for biocentric, instead of merely anthropocentric, thinking. These traditions generally embrace "all living beings" and "all sentient beings" and not simply "human beings." As much as we talk about the sacredness of life, for example, in abortion literature, our Western view seems fixated on *human* life as the near-exclusive bearer of this sacredness. Distressed by Western myopia in this regard, Richard Taylor has written:

Enthralled by man's rational nature, and finding no sign of it among what men fondly refer to as the brutes, philosophers and moralists have tended to dismiss the latter as mere *things*. Descartes even went so far as to call animals automata, implying that they do not even feel pain . . . Nor has religion, in our culture, done much to offset such an error . . . One can hear a thousand sermons, or study the casuistic manuals of an entire theological library, without finding a word on the subject of kindness to animals. When, in fact, it was proposed to establish in Rome a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, the effort was vetoed by Pope Pius IX on the grounds that we have no duty to them.²⁷

Asian religions, by contrast, explicitly remind us that we are part of a larger system of life. "*Bhavatu Sabbe Mangalam*" (May All Beings Be Happy!) is uttered by Buddhists as often as our "Amen" and is the sort of phrase a Buddhist will use to close a letter. The spirit of loving kindness toward all beings suffuses the *Metta Sutta* of Buddhism. We quote but a few lines:

In safety and in bliss
May all creatures be of a blissful heart.
Whatever breathing beings there may be,

Frail or firm . . . long or big . . . short or small

Seen or unseen, dwelling far or near,
Existing or yet seeking to exist,
May all creatures be of a blissful heart.²⁸

A new religious milieu, of course, will not be enough. In fact, the existence of that milieu will itself depend on a new definition of progress and a willingness to change our ways of life accordingly.

Progress will have to be understood as moral progress, and not merely economic, though the former is probably not possible without the latter. Among the most important elements of this new definition will be the halt of the population explosion. Already encouraging reports seem to be coming from the very countries under discussion here, especially China. There must also be a more equitable sharing of the world's resources. Most of us know about Abraham Maslow's "Needs Hierarchy," which graphically illustrates that people will pursue higher aims of life only when their basic needs are satisfied. Human beings who must *struggle* for their daily sustenance can hardly be expected to give a damn about their *human* neighbor, let alone the nonhuman living environment. Forced to either plunder our surroundings or sink further in squalor, which would we choose?

But the equitable sharing of resources will ultimately depend on new economic and political structures. If the poor shall not only always be with us, but also become increasingly numerous and increasingly desperate, it is hard to be sanguine about our possibilities.

Without envisioning these vast changes it is hard to hope at all. Yet when one becomes aware of such imponderables, one becomes numbed by their enormity. One wants to know what the solitary individual can do, and rightly so. Lao Tzu says that the thousand-mile journey begins under one's feet. So let me close with five suggestions, though a much longer list could surely be generated.

The first suggestion comes straight from the Buddha. He was once asked to put his entire teaching in a nutshell and, thinking a moment, he realized that not only his teaching but all the teachings of enlightened beings could be put in the same nutshell. He replied:

Abstain from actions which cause suffering to any. Perform actions which increase the well-being of all.
Purify your own mind through meditative discipline. This is the teaching of all the Awakened Ones.²⁹

The Buddha did not believe there was such a thing as an isolated consciousness in the body politic. The clearer and more compassionate the mind of the individual becomes, the more than clarity and compassion spreads throughout the network.

Second, to whatever degree we can, even if it seems quite small and insignificant, we should simplify our lives and absent ourselves from the crazed consumerism about us.

Third, to whatever degree possible, even if it seems quite small and insignificant, we should decrease our consumption of animal flesh. Even if we do this in small ways we will discover a new sensitivity to the total life community.

Fourth, we should support in some way those groups which in their various ways are trying to expand our awareness of the beauty, the importance, and above all, the fragility of our biosphere.

Fifth, we should learn and teach the New Story. What is it? Simply put, it is the story of the fifteen billion year evolution of Universe, of the four billion year evolution of the planet Earth and life upon it and the brief four million year evolution of human life within that greater context.

Why is it important to learn and teach this story? Human beings have always needed stories about how the world came to be and how they fit into it, stories that limn life's meaning, provide purpose, and guide education. The world's religions have been the traditional guardians of such stories. But the old stories are no longer fully functional. In a shrinking world, our very awareness of their multiplicity and of literal contradictions among them has eroded their power. The power they do retain in their inner meaning is jeopardized by a nursery-tale exterior that alienated many. Without a new, unifying story, there can be no spiritual unity of mankind. It is that simple.

But we already have what we need. For the first time in history, the human community has a single origin story. We must awaken, again and again, to the enormity of this fact, the verbal analogue of that revolutionary photograph of our age, the view of the single, whole Earth from space.

It is a curious fact of history that while forging the New Story, scientists had to bracket, and sometimes consciously repudiate, religious tradition. But the last few decades have already shown signs that the historical opposition between religion and science is breaking down. And it should. The

New Story is vast and generous enough to embrace all human cultures, enfolding the old stories yet allowing them to enrich its total meaning.

The most important chapter of the New Story concerns the Earth. We are becoming aware that the Earth is not, as we had thought, an essentially dead stage upon which living forms dance, but is itself a *living being*. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis suggests that the Earth in its totality functions as a single, self-regulating organism.

St. Paul said of God: "In you we live and move and have our being." However true this may be of the *ultimate* reality to which man's religions point, it is also true of the Earth. We are earth beings and profoundly so. God may finally sustain us in our being but it is through the Earth that God does so.

Thomas Berry has reminded us that, from Gaia's standpoint there are no national, racial, or religious boundaries. The sea and the air and the sky and sunlight, the living forms of earth, establish a single interdependent web of life. The nations must learn allegiance to this larger life system. And religious traditions, East and West, must allow the spirit of the Earth to revivify the truths they proclaim.

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29. Adapted from the *Dhammapada*, 183.

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